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ABSTRACT

Relationships exist between lifelong learning and community-based literacy programs, and Canada appears to have the kind of civic culture that takes literacy learning seriously, enjoying a strong civic or community context for literacy learning. Community literacy in Canada promotes the values and ideas of lifelong learning, legitimizing non-formal (and informal) learning and education for everyone, regardless of age, economic status, social status, gender, ethnic or national identity. New ways of learning are promoted by promoting citizenship values, by focusing learning on the learner, by breaking down traditional learning dichotomies, and by working effectively with new technologies. Literacy programs are in the process of developing to meet their learning and teaching objectives by helping instructors learn how to deal with low self-esteem, trauma and abuse, the embarrassment of older learners, and reaching young adults. They are also learning to work more effectively with volunteers. The thinking around lifelong learning includes a clear focus on economic strategy and policy, with these practices being redesigned as needed to support lifelong learning as part of the culture in Canada. (KC)

ED 455 413

Literacy in the Community Learning Context

Craig McNaughton

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Literacy in the community learning context

Craig McNaughton

1.0 Orientation

The purpose of this section is to assess the relationship between lifelong learning and literacy in the "community context." More specifically, the purpose is to trace the relations which exist between lifelong learning and community-based literacy programs.

The word "community" in connection with "literacy" seems to evoke an association with what are referred to as "community-based literacy programs" — programs of literacy learning generally sponsored outside of formal or traditional institutions of learning (colleges, schools, universities). In other words, the tendency is to think of those programs that are run with minimal or modest public funding, informal or semi-formal teaching programs, dedicated volunteer tutors, generally underpaid staff, community fundraisers (bake sales, golf tournaments, etc.) — and from a certain "small-p" political perspective.

It is the small-p political perspective that is perhaps the key distinguishing mark of a community-based literacy program. Literacy workers who are active in community-based programs seem focused intensely on what can be called *social inclusion*.

There are many groups in society — poor people, homeless people, street youth, abused women, the unemployed, the underemployed, the learning disabled, the handicapped, prisoners and parolees, etc. — who are not full participants in the society around them. Literacy training is understood by community-based literacy programs (along with related services in job training, life skills, computer skills, addiction treatment, health care, etc.) as a crucial means of empowering people — of giving them (or at least attempting to give them) the essential set of tools that will allow them to participate more effectively in their community, in the economy, in elections, in the wider education system, even in their families.[1]

But if it is this small-p "political" perspective that distinguishes "community-based" literacy work, then it becomes possible to include within our review those literacy programs sponsored by colleges, schools and universities wherever they share the same outlook.

For that matter, we can also include an array of literacy programs and projects sponsored by various government, private and "non-literacy" non-government organizations that fully

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[1] The definition of literacy used within Frontier College's Beat the Street Program for youth captures the spirit of community-based literacy: "literacy includes the ability to communicate, to be accepted and to have an opportunity to become a fully participating and critical member of society" (www.nald.ca/bts/bts1/website_bts_background.htm).

understand the role played by literacy and related training in strengthening both the people and the programs for which they are responsible. Indeed the reality is that many of the literacy programs across Canada are sponsored by coalitions that comprise volunteer groups, educational institutions, government ministries, private companies, labour unions, and community groups concerned with related social issues.[2]

Of course regardless of this shared outlook around social inclusion, there often remain significant differences amongst the wide variety of Canadian organizations that are drawn to support literacy work. These differences revolve around the type of learning and teaching environments offered, management approaches, level of funding, etc. But the very good thing about the Canadian situation is that there exists a strong consensus about the legitimacy of literacy as a way of helping to ensure social inclusion.

The first basic point to make, then, in assessing the link between lifelong learning and literacy is that Canada appears to have the kind of civic culture that takes literacy learning fairly seriously. We still need to organize ourselves more efficiently as a learning society -- we need to look much more rigorously at the practical implications of our shared belief in literacy and social inclusion -- but the positive reality is that Canada enjoys a strong civic or community context for literacy learning.

2.0 Promoting the values and ideas of lifelong learning

Community literacy programs specifically promote "lifelong learning" — it is a phrase that recurs often in the mission statements, objectives and program descriptions of literacy programs.[3] But more substantially, there appear to be three specific ways in which community-based literacy programs promote the values and ideas of lifelong learning:

1. these programs work to legitimize the *ideas of both non-formal and informal learning*, especially for those adults who have missed out on, and may not be able to retrieve, formal educational opportunities;

2. these programs legitimize the *idea that education is for everyone* without exception;

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[2]In Nova Scotia numerous Learning Networks have been set up. The Annapolis County Learning Network, for example, established in 1994 to promote adult literacy education, includes the Regional School Board, the Regional Library, the Black Educators Association, the Native Council of Nova Scotia, the Department of Community Services, the Health Board, the Canada Post Heritage Club, Human Resources Development Canada, as well as literacy practitioners, volunteers and learners. See www.nald.ca/PROVINCE/NS/acln/about/about.htm.

[3]For example, the Adult Basic Education Association of Hamilton-Wentworth uses this line to identify itself: "We develop and plan literacy services and promote lifelong learning in the community" (www.nald.ca/abea.htm).

3. they promote many of the same *ideas of learning and teaching* favoured within the perspective of lifelong learning.

2.1 Legitimizing non-formal (and informal) learning

One of the central tenets of lifelong learning is that learning is not something that only goes on in schools or other formal settings. It can go on — and indeed many times *ought* to go on — in a less formal context. Admission rules, evaluation processes, study environment and teaching methods should sometimes, maybe quite a bit of the time, be less formal so that more people can get more effectively involved in the learning game.

In the literacy context, you are clearly dealing with a lot of actual and potential students who, for a variety of reasons, are not likely to function well in a formal educational setting — at least not right away. These individuals — all of them much more intelligent and quietly ambitious than even they give themselves credit for — lack the formal qualifications, techniques and inclination to participate, at least at the beginning, in a formal program of studies. But they can certainly function well within a non-formal or semi-formal setting. ("Semi-formal" or "less-formal" may be better terms to use with literacy programs since they are, on average, geared to expectations on the part of the learners, the community and governments that the course work provided by the programs will lead to credentials or recognized accomplishment of some kind that will actually mean something within the mainstream educational and employment system.)

Here we have the "life-wide" aspect of lifelong learning, but with a twist. It is not so much a case, for most literacy students, of moving between formal and non-formal learning opportunities, as would be the case for someone who has succeeded in school and college or university and is being encouraged to think about non-formal ways of continuing their learning career. It is a case of citizens who face significant reading and writing challenges realizing that quite a bit of educational ground can be made up in a non-formal (or less-formal) program of study and practice. Students in community-based programs can start with various levels of Adult Basic Education (ABE)[4] and move up through General Educational Development (GED) testing to adult high school programs designed to give them their Grade 12 (or a lower grade) equivalency. Once they secure their high school graduation, their options may shift, allowing them to consider entry to college or university programs or courses.

Many of the adults who participate in literacy programs had a very bad time in the formal school setting. Often it was a case of unrecognized learning disabilities that produced frustration for both teacher and student — and an inaccurate conclusion that the student was "non-academic"

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[4]The Discovery Centre in Botwood, Newfoundland, for example, offers three levels of ABE: "Level 1 is basic literacy tutoring to improve reading and writing skills; Level 2 involves courses in math, science and communication skills designed to prepare you for more advances Level III credit courses; Level 3 consists of credit courses in all subjects to meet ABE Graduation Requirements" (www.discoverycentre.nf.ca/botwood.html).

and should do other things in life. Other times, it was a case of parents pulling the student from school or failing to provide moral and material support to the student to allow them to perform well. Sometimes it was peer pressure that terminated schooling.

Whatever the circumstances, the student fell out of touch with the idea of being a student. Literacy programs are very successful at *replanting the learning seed* — at re-establishing at least the possibility (with much support and encouragement) that everyone can be a student, or a "learner." The key message of a literacy program: That falling-out you had a few years back with education and learning? *Put it behind you.* You are capable, and with the support of your tutor and the learning resources here at our centre, you will disprove all the disbelievers, including, especially, yourself.

To be realistic, though, it is hard to move an adult facing a low-literacy situation through to post-secondary, even secondary, education. The student has to be extremely dedicated and willing to settle in for the "long haul"; he or she also has to be lucky enough to receive continuous and appropriate support from teachers and peers. Things have to come together.

So what happens if you don't make it through to formal education and training opportunities or even a reasonable facsimile? The answer is that literacy programs also make *informal* learning possible. Community-based literacy programs allow people to generate non-formal learning "credentials" that allow them to learn on their own. They learn that they can learn.

Even if it's just a new-found ability to read more of the newspaper, or the ability to fill out an application form, or to surf the Net, or to throw words that actually mean something on a piece of paper or computer screen, learning is made possible by literacy programs specifically because they facilitate active, demonstrable re-entry to the world of learning for people whose life experiences and circumstances may make it very hard for them to succeed at formal learning.

In short — and this is a crucial point in designing a national strategy around lifelong learning — community-based literacy programs help fill out the "non-formal" part of the learning spectrum, allowing renewal of the possibility of re-entry to the more formal learning systems and/or the possibility of developing more substantive informal learning.

2.2 Legitimizing education for everyone...

The emphasis in lifelong learning is on the fact that education or learning is something that should be accessible to all. It is not something for a select few, for an élite of very talented or well-funded people. In short, lifelong learning expresses the idea of *democratization* of (and through) learning. Everyone gets to participate in the learning society.

Despite strong traditions of public and continuing education in Canada, there are many ways in which we still seem to fall back on the idea that learning, or at least extensive or intensive education, is something only for a relative minority — only for "smart" people; only for the young

(the idea of "school age" persists); only for people who can afford it both financially and time-wise (the historical idea of education as a "leisure" activity persists); only for men — or only for women; etc.

Literacy programs are intensely opposed to any idea of exclusion from learning and education. They actively fight to "gain admittance" for more people — to take those who have been rejected or who have bowed out and make it possible for them to be part of society, including part of society's learning, problem-solving and creative processes. Two of Frontier College's guiding principles: "Everyone can learn and everyone has a right to literacy.... We are committed to working with people who have been rejected or not given adequate learning opportunities elsewhere."[5]

2.2.1 ... regardless of age

Literacy programs are champions of the idea that you are never too old (or too young) to learn. This is the "lifelong" aspect of lifelong learning — but again there is a twist.

The message of lifelong learning sometimes seems directed at educated people who, aside from perhaps some interest courses or a bit of job training now and then, tend to think that they finished with learning back in their twenties when they finished up their university or college degrees. Lifelong learning is trying to correct an impression that learning stops at some point early in your life.

In the literacy context, the argument for *learning continuance* is a little more dramatic: you are addressing people who did not get a proper education in the first place. There is no strong foundation or base to work with, no personal expectation, no residual learning "habit" — nothing, in a sense, to feel particularly guilty about when the promoters of lifelong learning come calling with their message of learning renewal.

Literacy programs are specifically focused on adults (and to some extent adolescents) who have to be convinced that education and learning are actually possible for them. The job of reactivating the learning impulse is much more demanding because conclusions were reached about being incompetent.

2.2.2 ... regardless of money (or lack of it)

Literacy programs are champions of the idea that poverty should not be accepted as a barrier to learning or education. If you want to learn and are facing the restrictions imposed by poverty, literacy programs innovate (and press governments and communities) to create the circumstances that will allow a person to take time to study. Many if not most offer childcare arrangements that will free up parents; bus fare or transportation arrangements are often provided to allow those

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[5] www.frontiercollege.ca/english/about us/mission.htm

with small monthly incomes to attend class; etc. Programs generally charge nothing for their programs. All that they require is a serious commitment from the learner and learning proceeds (resources permitting!).

Community-based programs create a learning space for people coping with poverty where normally none would or could be created. They are one of the most effective ways of extending the idea of a learning society to those who otherwise will never participate in society's learning and educational systems. Literacy programs allow poor people to get "back in the game" — and by doing that these programs also become one of the country's best ways of allowing people to move themselves out of poverty.

2.2.3 ... regardless of social status

Community-based literacy programs promote learning for people on the "lowest rungs" of society — the homeless, street kids, prisoners and ex-cons, etc.

Literacy programs provide some of the best ways of reaching street youth. The Toronto Street Education Coalition, for example, is a "coalition of organizations that provide literacy help to socially isolated and homeless youth in Toronto." The Coalition includes Frontier College's Beat the Street program; Graffiti-Jeunesse, a program for French-speaking youth; the St Christopher House Adult Literacy Program; the Parkdale Arts and Recreation Centre; and others.[6] Similar literacy initiatives for street youth exist in Ottawa, Sydney, Regina, Winnipeg, Scarborough and elsewhere.

2.2.4 ... regardless of gender (being a woman)

Violence against women is a huge barrier to lifelong learning. Literacy programs open up learning and education for women who are victims of abuse. In particular, literacy programs work to fight off the view held by many abused women that they are "stupid" — the programs encourage women to discover they have a mind, that they can, despite the repressive behaviour they have had to endure, learn and think for themselves.[7]

2.2.5 ... regardless of gender (being a man)

There does not seem to be a focus on men and literacy that would match the focus on women and literacy. Imbedded in the work of literacy programs, though, is a persistent effort to overcome any assumption by men or the people around them that learning and education are not for them. A lot of the work around overcoming embarrassment seems to be directed in this direction —

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[6]www.nald.ca/btx/partners/partnership.html

[7]See Jenny Horsman, "'But I'm not a therapist'; Furthering Discussion about Literacy Work with Survivors of Trauma" (draft discussion paper 11/4/99), p. 28.

towards men who somehow feel uneasy being in a classroom setting.

Dick, a male student at the Journeys program in Winnipeg, was asked to comment on the value of sharing his learning difficulties with a group of learners. His answer seems to reflect some of the social struggle that surrounds a male adult's decision to "go back to school": "... it's not a problem when somebody asks [...] I am going back to school, I am taking adult education. They might look at you and [say], oh you're going back to school and whatnot. To me ... I feel proud, I don't care what people think once I'm getting what I want to get. And learning the stuff I want to learn. I'll continue doing it."[8]

2.2.6 ... regardless of ethnic or national identity

Community-based literacy programs are ranged along the frontlines of Canada's efforts to welcome new immigrants and refugees to the country — and to include them in the country's learning systems. You obviously need French and/or English to be able to function in Canada. Through the English as a Second Language (ESL) programming (offered by many literacy programs alongside basic literacy programming for French or English speakers), newcomers to Canada can work towards integration in the education, employment and other systems of the country.

Literacy programs also make a special effort to include Canadian-born minorities (e.g., aboriginal peoples, blacks) who are often discriminated against and need literacy to be able to advance their interests. The Native Education Centre in Vancouver is currently working with CODE Inc., for example, to develop a ten-year Canadian Aboriginal Literacy Enhancement Strategy.[9]

2.3 Promoting new ways of learning...

Lifelong learning is concerned to explore and promote new kinds, new models of learning — ways of involving more people, more effectively in learning. There is a sense of experimentation with new pedagogies and new perspectives in ways that will allow people to travel along more than traditional academic paths.

Community-based literacy programs, in their effort to reach populations not traditionally involved in intensive learning, are similarly engaged in looking for non-traditional learning and teaching styles, models and methods — for techniques that will work for people who have trouble entering the learning system and seeing themselves as "learners."

Four areas of similar interest are discussed in the present section:

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[8]Robin Millar and Joy So, *Learning and Talking Together; Research investigating persistence and retention in adult literacy programs* (www.pangea.ca/~journeys).

[9]www.nald.ca/WHATNEW/hnews/press/press.htm

- understanding learning in terms of citizenship
- centering learning on the learner
- breaking down traditional learning "dichotomies"
- facilitating learning through the new technologies

2.3.1 ... by promoting citizenship values

Lifelong learning tends to focus on citizenship values — generally in contra-distinction to views of society that focus more specifically on "economic" values. The idea is to think in more "holistic" terms to create human beings who are well-rounded — economically competent but also competent and engaged in other areas of life.

Community-based literacy programs also see the first duty of learning and teaching as the creation of "whole" people, full citizens: A person has to be able to work and earn a living — of course — but he or she also needs to function well as a parent, as an active member of the community, and most importantly "in their own head."

2.3.2 ... by focusing learning on the learner

Lifelong learning focuses on what the literacy community calls "learner-centred" approaches. Both traditions believe that it is the self-aware learner who is the driving force behind a literate/learning society.

The literacy community is quite aware that in teaching literacy skills you need to find an approach that makes sense to the learner. This means trying to find materials and goals and ways of speaking that will connect positively and meaningfully with each learner. Laubach Literacy of Ontario describes its approach in these terms: "Each One Teach One is adult teaching philosophy that supports student-centred instruction. It encourages tutors to identify the learners' needs and design instruction to meet their individual needs."[10]

Any kind of "top-down" or teacher-centred approach, both traditions believe, is bound to fail, if not in the short term, then in the long term as the learner loses the sense of direction that was imported rather than "home grown." Abused women need to be able to speak about things that make sense to abused women; unemployed fishers in Newfoundland or Nova Scotia need to feel that what they are learning makes sense in the cultural and employment setting from which they come; etc.

2.3.3 ... by breaking down traditional learning "dichotomies"

One of the themes within discussions about lifelong learning is the perceived need to overcome the "dichotomies" that inhabit our understanding of education and learning. One is the dichotomy

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[10]www.trainingpost.org/llo.htm

between academic and technical/vocational learning. There is a feeling that our society has in recent time put a greater value on what we do with our "heads" than what we do with our "hands."

There is a strong realization within literacy programs that learning proceeds best when academic materials are conveyed in practical contexts. In short, the knowledge about language has to be imbedded in information, activity, discussion and reflection about the everyday concerns and interests of the learners.

Yukon Learn tutors assist adults not only with reading, but also with "keyboarding, banking, resume writing, applying for a job and taking the Yukon driver test."[11] The Yukon program has produced a number of teaching/learning tools with a practical bent — an introductory manual on land surveying, for example, and a book on traditional hunting and cooking.

Arguably the whole view of literacy, in the wake of the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS), is that by literacy one in fact means a set of very *practical* skills: the ability to read everyday forms, bus schedules, charts, etc. This is what was tested in the survey — along with more traditional literacies, such as the ability to read prose. The idea was to focus on the learning opportunities or tasks a person actually encounters during the day.

The definition of literacy has expanded well past the traditional notion that literacy is just about reading or recognizing words — it has to do with acquiring a full bank of thinking and manipulation skills. Literacy programs think in terms of giving people a full "suite" of essential skills, not simply the singular ability to read or count.

A number of initiatives in the literacy field are working to give learners a practical, "hands on" knowledge of the *process* of learning. A good example is the COGNET system being used within some of Corrections Canada's literacy programs for inmates. The idea is to make the student aware of the tools of learning, to demystify the process of learning — not just to give the inmates a larger vocabulary, but to let them in on the tricks of the learning trade, to help them "learn how to learn."[12]

Similar work is being done by the Learning and Reading Partners Adult Reading System in Prince Edward Island. This program offers Holistic Adult Learner Education (HALE), which encourages learning geared to experience in the community (Community as Teacher Program) and around issues of interest to the learners (e.g., related to health and work, and reflection about

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[11]www.nald.ca/province/Yukon/yuklearn/wedo/wedo.htm

[12]For information on COGNET, contact Bea Fisher, Education Programs Manager, Correctional Service of Canada, c/o Saskatchewan Penitentiary, Box 160, Prince Albert, Saskatchewan, S6V 5R6.

the process of learning).[13]

2.3.4 ... by working effectively with new technologies

Theoretically, there is no necessary connection between the idea that learning ought to be "lifelong" and the wave of computer and communication technologies that is rolling through late-twentieth-century society. Nevertheless lifelong learning tends to be caught up in promotion of these new technologies — and from a practical standpoint, the fact is that the new computer and communication technologies do suddenly make it possible to reach and involve a lot more people in learning at any one time (space, time and resource limitations that restrained learning in the past can now be overcome).

Similarly, the literacy community is, as a rule, quite caught up in promoting and using the new technologies. These technologies are understood by most literacy programs and organizations as a crucial part of any successful learning strategy for people facing literacy challenges.

Perhaps this is unsurprising, but incorporation of the new technologies figures as one of the most important means of reaching street youth with literacy programming. The 1998 project of Rideau Street Youth Enterprises — *The Street Youth Literacy Skills Enhancement Project*[14] — provided "literacy and technological skills enhancement" (plus supervised employment preparation and workplace skills development).

However, the new technologies also provide one of the best ways of bringing older adults through the literacy door. Virtually everyone who is concerned about getting or holding on to a job now knows that it is highly advantageous to have at least some computer training. In Halifax, the halfway-house literacy program run for parolees by the St Leonard's Society combines computer training with literacy work. The teachers in the program say that if they were able to offer more computer training, they would be able to increase the number of parolees participating in their literacy program by 200 percent (from 18 men to 50 or 60).[15] Technology is a "drawing card" for literacy learning.

Voice software is one particular piece of new technology that has fired the imagination of adult learners. Being able to speak to a computer that in turn writes out the words, or being able to have the computer read a long text to you, crosses in a very dramatic way the gulf that often exists between the verbal and intellectual skills of adult literacy learners and their ability to use

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[13]www.nald.ca/province/pei/lrp/lrphist.htm

[14]National Literacy Secretariat, g/max database, Q98L10197.

[15]Interview with Margie Naish and Joy Spadoni, Halifax, September 22, 1998.

their vocabulary and thinking skills when reading or writing.[16]

One of the obvious benefits, especially for programs and their tutors, is that these technologies allow the literacy community itself to pool its intellectual resources. The National Adult Literacy Database (as this section demonstrates!) contains a galaxy of information, including full texts of literacy reports; descriptions of what many literacy programs are doing, with contact names and numbers; on-line discussions and research initiatives; links to literacy organizations in other countries; etc.[17]

3.0 Developing the expertise needed to support lifelong learning

Effective promotion of the values and ideas of lifelong learning is important — and clearly community-based literacy programs are one of the most important means Canada has of promoting the values and ideas of lifelong learning.

However, development of the specific expertise needed to make learning possible for all segments of the Canadian population is arguably more important. To make learning both *extensive* and *intensive* in Canada, we need to focus on the practical means by which people facing serious barriers to learning are going to go about the learning process.

We should probably admit right away that this is a very tall order. It is not easy to figure out how to involve the entire population in a learning system — and it is in this realistic context that the word "expertise" is used.

Literacy practitioners and adult learners will be the first to tell you that their work is at least as frustrating as it is rewarding. It is not just the general lack of resources for literacy programs — though that is clearly an aggravating factor that makes it difficult to judge fairly how accomplished everyone in Canada might be in their education and learning if we actually gave everyone the same chance to perform. The frustration is in the fact that the literacy learning process at times seems so slow. Even for experienced tutors it is sometimes hard to see the good

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[16]The Learners Advisory Network of the Movement for Canadian Literacy has actively promoted use of computers and voice software by learners. See the first report in the Network's Literacy Technologies Series, *Voice Software, A Comparison of Currrent Products*. In a similar vein, there is a multimedia CD-ROM product called The New Reading Disc available in Canada through the Centre for Literacy of Quebec. The Disc "begins with the premise that beginning readers are not beginning thinkers. People with reading difficulties are often expert language users when the are talking or listening, but have a specific problem with written language" (www.nald.ca/province/que/litcent/Publication_Products/disc/disc1.htm).

[17]AlphaPlus in Ontario is another example of an on-line resource for the Canadian literacy community, including extensive opportunities for practitioners and learners to speak with each other from one end of the county to the other.

that is happening. Students often look like — and feel like — they are getting nowhere fast.

It is quite possible to look at general literacy survey results for the country, as Peter Calamai has done, and conclude that we are just not turning things around — despite what could be characterized as a fairly concerted investment in literacy work by governments, tutors and learners across the country. The same large percentage of Canadians is living at very low levels of literacy — very low, at least, for a country that wants to position itself as a major player within the global knowledge economy.[18]

But despite the presence of a certain sense of pessimism, there is something encouraging happening among community-based literacy programs: a problem-solving attitude has taken hold. There is a sense that the problems of learning facing these programs are perfectly normal. They are a cause for reflection, for continuing re-strategizing, not for any desperate sense that while literacy work may give comfort to some, there is no hope of really changing things for the estimated millions of Canadians whose literacy skills are not up to the challenges presented by a rapidly evolving knowledge society.

The literacy field is currently involved in what one could almost characterize as one large, ongoing professional workshop designed to capitalize on strengths and overcome weaknesses. The field — one that has grown considerably since the International Year for Literacy in 1990 — is now in the process of sorting out, for example, which elements of government and business management techniques should be used to deal with the realities that characterize the field of adult literacy learning.

Literacy programs sponsor a wide variety of training sessions designed to develop the battery of skills needed to make their mission work.[19] There is no static sense of expertise here — rather a fairly mature understanding that "expertise" in learning and teaching comes in the midst of "trial and error," ongoing comparison of best practices, and honest discussions of what works and does not work in different situations.

These are some of the kinds of expertise that literacy programs are in the process of developing to meet their learning and teaching objectives:

- dealing with low self-esteem
- dealing with trauma and abuse
- dealing with the embarrassment of older learners
- reaching young adults

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[18]See Peter Calamai, "A Nation in Denial," *Saturday Night* (September 1999), insert; and Calamai, "The Literacy Gap," *Toronto Star*, August 28, 1999, J1-2.

[19]See, for example, the extensive array of workshops offered by Literacy Link Eastern Ontario (www.inkingston.com/lleo/html/training.html).

- dealing with alcoholism and drug abuse
- dealing with unemployment and underemployment
- coping with lack of teaching and learning resources
- tapping into the core values of the individual and the community
- managing transition (and non-transition) from non-formal to formal learning
- managing learner management of learning
- communicating useful program information effectively
- facilitating early intervention or other prevention measures
- capitalizing on new computer technologies
- working with volunteers
- program evaluation

A couple of these areas of emerging expertise are considered in greater detail below to give some sense of the way in which the literacy field is developing a body of expertise that provides a foundation for lifelong learning among non-traditional learning populations.[20]

3.1 Dealing with trauma and abuse

Lifelong learning is an impossibility for many, not because they lack interest and talent, but because they are weighed down by serious psychological trauma and histories of sexual, physical and emotional abuse. This is a major factor in reaching street kids and homeless people, for example. Beat the Street estimates that 70% of street youth in downtown Toronto have experienced either physical or sexual abuse.[21]

Jenny Horsman has done some excellent work developing expertise around the management of trauma and abuse in a literacy learning situation. In 1996-97, she conducted a cross-country survey with both literacy workers and adult learners and came up with a number of intriguing suggestions about how literacy programs can do a better job reaching out to women who have suffered abuse. A selection:

- learners in full-time programs who spend time with a counsellor should be "judged, not as missing time in the [literacy] program, but as doing work to further their learning." This is an interesting concept for lifelong learning — that time spent healing yourself to be able to learn is part of the learning process. Arguably this is the most essential kind of learning —

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[20]It would be possible to discuss the emergence of literacy expertise in each of the areas mentioned, and others. Some of the work is fascinating — such as that by Action ABC Inc. in providing literacy training (including computer skills, job-hunting skills and numeracy skills) to recovering substance abusers. Action ABC runs programs at the Jewish General Hospital, the Montreal General and the Salvation Army Booth Centre in Montreal, as well as the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health in Toronto.

[21]www.nald.ca/bts/bts1/website_bts_background.htm

that of knowing yourself;

- the current stress on program outcomes does not take account "of much of the learning that has to take place and which takes the energy of the learner...." Horsman notes that certain issues of violence and how to deal with it "take energy away from the literacy learning process";

- literacy programs are in an excellent position to promote literacy and learning among women who have suffered abuse. Horsman urges literacy workers and learners to do more to educate the shelter movement about literacy programming — to "explore educational links with shelters";

- literacy programs need to work effectively on ways of caring for the volunteers who are asked to deal with those who have been abused. Boundaries are needed, for example, to prevent teacher/tutor burnout;

- she observes that learners may "have difficulty dreaming of possibilities or imagining goals." This is quite relevant to any serious national strategy around learning: people have to learn first to "trust their own knowledge";

- Horsman discusses the phenomenon of learners who come to class but appear to be "spaced out" (daydreaming, apparently bored). This is a frustrating thing for teachers and for learners (who, once again, feel they must be "stupid"), but Horsman suggests that this be recognized as a completely normal occurrence that can be talked about by students and teachers and managed in various ways.[22]

3.2 Working with volunteers

Arguably one of the best and necessary ways of making lifelong learning a reality is to develop an effective, well-trained cadre of teaching/learning volunteers. The idea in a sense would be not only to make each of us a lifelong learner, but also a lifelong *teacher*. We all have knowledge we could choose to pass on to others. But we have to know we have the knowledge, we have to refine it, and we have to know how to pass it on to people.

Literacy programs rely extensively on volunteer tutors. Consequently they spend time training those volunteers, and an increasing amount of time learning how to do that training better and how to manage their ongoing relationship with volunteer tutors optimally.

The PALS program in Alberta provides an example of the kind of volunteer training that occurs: the program has detailed job descriptions for their tutors; those teaching in Basic Literacy Program take a 12-hour tutor training workshop; and those teaching ESL take a 15-hour

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[22]Horsman, "'But I'm not a therapist'...." (see note 7 above), pp. 7, 9, 13, 15.

workshop.[23]

The field is becoming more aware that there is room for improvement in the way literacy tutoring is managed. A thesis written by Catherine Hambly (*Behaviour and beliefs of volunteer literacy tutors*) looks at the relationship between tutors and their respective literacy organizations. Hambly noticed a tendency in the literacy program she examined for the tutors to lose touch with the program; she also observed that tutors tend to "value good will over good training" and tend to rely on "individual attention" rather than specific training to meet the needs of the learner.[24] A report by Literacy Partners of Quebec confirms the need to manage volunteer tutors more effectively — a need to provide them with teaching materials, for example; to stay in touch with them; and to use a "more stringent screening process when considering people as tutors."[25]

Community Literacy of Ontario, in a 1997 survey of tutors, identified both positive and negative aspects of the work of literacy volunteers. The major positive impact of tutoring work, it was felt, was on learner self-esteem; another benefit was that volunteers developed new skills and experiences (two-way learning). But half said "their effectiveness could be enhanced with greater training and support." Other suggestions by the tutors:

- update training skills
- provide more information and materials
- augment networking [between tutors]
- increase government recognition of literacy agencies
- provide more staff and volunteer support
- provide more recognition of volunteers
- reduce cumbersome bureaucracy[26]

4.0 Redesigning economic strategies

The thinking around lifelong learning includes a clear focus on economic strategy and policy. There is firm recognition of the idea that more effective learning, especially within a knowledge-based economy, makes sound economic sense. "Economic" encompasses what is normally meant by "social" — and vice versa (economic and social policies are integrated within lifelong learning).

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[23]www.pals.ca/programs.htm

[24]www.nald.ca/province/que/litcent/publication_products/wkpaper3/page3.htm

[25]Mandie Aaron, *Increasing awareness for successful outcomes; Referral systems in Quebec* (LPQ, September 1997), p.22.

[26]www.nald.ca/province/ont/clo

By contrast, the literacy community tends to be much less focused on economic strategy. The community's push for increased funding of adult literacy programs does often include reference to the economic benefits of literacy,[27] but the focus is more persistently on the *social development* of both individuals and communities. An improved ability to find or hold on to a job through the acquisition of literacy skills is regarded as important, but only one aspect of social development — the main point being a stronger sense of social participation or empowerment.[28]

But despite its tendency to eclipse the economic value of literacy with ideas of social inclusion, the literacy community is nevertheless custodian of one of the country's most under-utilized (under-capitalized) economic resources. What passes as an issue of social justice or (for others) charity, is actually an issue of wealth generation, not for the individual with literacy problems as much as for those around that person. Behind the question of fairplay and kindness is a very practical question of whether or not we want to release the intellectual wealth of citizens held hostage behind literacy and related communication barriers.

Consider the work of the Aboriginal Literacy Foundation Inc., a literacy program in downtown Winnipeg. By all accounts, downtown Winnipeg — especially its aboriginal population — faces a very serious social and economic challenge. The Caledon Institute of Social Policy fears what it calls the emergence of "urban ghetto-slums" in Winnipeg and other western Canadian cities.[29] The federal and Manitoba governments have just moved to intensify their support for the 50,000 aboriginal residents of Winnipeg in areas such as justice, health, housing, economic development and training.[30]

The Aboriginal Literacy Foundation has been doing exemplary economic development work for some time now, moving single aboriginal parents from social assistance through its literacy program to either employment or further education. The success rate is virtually 100%. The economic and social implications are immense: if literacy programs can in this instance create wage-earners and prospective wage-earners (active students) out of people who were on welfare, why not invest much more in such programs? Society saves its investment in social assistance,

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[27]Literacy Partners of Manitoba, and other literacy groups, have referred to the figure used by the Canadian Business Task Force on Literacy — that the annual cost of low literacy to the business community is an estimated $4 billion per year (due to accidents and reading errors); $10 billion per year if the cost of social services to support low literacy is added in. See Literacy Partners of Manitoba, *Literacy Action Day Briefing Notes* (February 1998), p. 2.

[28]See, for example, Susan Hoddinott, *"something to think about; please think about this"* (Ottawa Board of Education, 1998), pp. 209-10.

[29]Caledon Institute on Social Policy, *Aboriginal People in Canada's Labour Market* (www.caledoninst.org).

[30]*Globe and Mail*, July 8, 1999.

and a host of positive economic and social spin-offs replace the negative effects of welfare living.[31]

Project Literacy Kelowna in Kelowna, B.C., provides an example of how very small literacy gains — even a new ability to hold a pencil, or to recognize 300 words — can inspire individuals to go find work, even if only entry-level. The "magic ingredient" in this kind of success is not a massive gain in literacy skill — it is the restoration of self-esteem and self-confidence. Human Resources Development Canada spends a small amount on this program (it is for 40 people).[32] Why not sponsor this kind of human investment on a massive scale?

These are the kinds of literacy learning success stories that do not seem to have been built into the country's sense of large-scale economic strategy. The federal government, for example, seems much more focused on investment in the traditional "wheels" of a knowledge economy — high-tech industries, advanced research and post-secondary education. The idea of a concerted national investment at the "lower end" of the knowledge economy has not yet taken hold.

The overall federal policy framework is ideal. The Canadian Minister of Finance in his February 1999 budget speech provided an excellent section called "Equipping Canadians to Succeed in the 21st Century: Knowledge, Skills and Innovation." The Minister asserted: "Education is critical, for it equips Canadians with the skills, the aptitude and the attitude to seize the new opportunities

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[31]See "Profile of the Aboriginal Literacy Foundation Inc.," a factsheet used during Literacy Action Day 1998. This program works with 30 students at any one time, graduating 10 students per month. The average entry level is Grade 5/6; the average graduation level, after 9 months of study, is Grade 10. At the time, there were 200 individuals on a waiting list for this program. Rhonda McCoriston, one of the program's teachers, estimates that 10 similar (and similarly successful) programs could be set up to take care of the demand. The investment would be $120,000 per year to set up each of the 10 programs (2 teachers, materials & facilities); coincidentally, the direct saving in social assistance payments would (once those continuing their education finished their course work and found work) be $120,000 per year per program. The indirect economic benefits would include employment, self-confidence, functional families, new tax revenues, economic growth, family literacy and learning, good health, etc. (See www.nald.ca/alf.htm.)

[32]The Project Literacy Kelowna Society is providing basic literacy tutoring services to HRDC clients who have not been able to benefit from traditional training programs due to poor literacy skills. The tutoring service (for about 40 adults) has run in one-year contracts from September 1997 and is proving very successful. 91% of the adults who take the tutoring gain skills such as the new ability to hold a pencil and write one's name; the new ability to select an action or descriptive word; an increased sight word vocabulary of 300 words; the ability to write complete sentences on a workplace-related theme; the ability to understand written words, follow directions and draw conclusions from them (critical thinking skills). Contact: Steven Venier, Project Literacy Kelowna Society (250-762-8732).

the future has to offer.... What we seek is not simply knowledge for the few — but for the many.... every Canadian who wants to learn should have the opportunity to do so."

These are exactly the same principles supported by proponents of lifelong learning. But of the concrete programs chosen by the Minister to illustrate how each principle was being implemented — investment in post-graduate research (to equip Canadians with the right "skills, aptitude and attitude"); investment in Registered Education Savings Plans (to ensure education is "for the many"); and investment in prenatal nutrition and child tax credits (to ensure every Canadian "who wants to learn" will be able to do so) — only the last one moves at all in the direction of addressing the situation of adult learners or would-be adult learners who find themselves trapped behind the barriers of poverty, disability, abuse, job loss, under-education and low literacy.

What seems to be lacking is a concerted effort to *assess and then access* the economic productivity that can be released by community-based literacy work.[33] We need to become more proficient in harnessing the economic power that attaches to the simple, yet perilous act of even one individual crossing the literacy bridge to the wider world of education and employment. In an instant, that individual starts to contribute a store of knowledge, energy and ingenuity which up to the moment of crossing had remained largely hidden and "off-line."

Some literacy programs — those involving diverse community partnerships — appear to be close to achieving the kind of integrated socio-economic strategy favoured by lifelong learning. The Baie Verte Peninsula Literacy Outreach Program in Newfoundland is engaged in an intensive promotion of the need to upgrade literacy skills amongst the population of 9,000 that resides along the northeast coast of Newfoundland. The Program's message: in the new knowledge economy literacy has to be regarded as "essential" (in the old economy it was merely "desirable"); education in the knowledge society should be "advanced" not "basic"; and yesterday's manual workers have to become "information processors."[34]

In Eastern Ontario, the Literacy and Economic Development Project is working to improve economic and social conditions in the counties of Stormont-Dundas-Glengarry and Prescott-Russell. Closely linked with private and public sectors, the Project is working to promote literacy with a view to boosting community and business development in the region. The Project is based on a model that has worked in Georgia — the creation of "Certified Literate Communities." (Communities certified literate are communities that demonstrate "broad-based commitment from

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[33]A good start has been made with the Conference Board of Canada's review of the impact of literacy investment (or lack of investment) in the workplace: Michael Bloom et al., *The Economic Benefits of Improving Literacy Skills in the Workplace* (August 1997). See also Vivian Shalla and Grant Schellenberg, *The Value of Words: Literacy and Economic Security in Canada* (Statistics Canada & National Literacy Secretariat/Human Resources Development Canada, May 1998).

[34]www.entnet.nf.ca/emerald/literacy/lit_regn/htm

all sectors of the community, effective literacy recruitment and programming and methods for measuring and evaluating outcomes."[35] The certification is used to attract business.)

There is some exciting work to be done by the right team of economists, lifelong learning advocates, literacy workers and adult learners. Canadians and their governments understand the social importance of investing in literacy. We know it's often the right thing to do for someone who is down and out and trying desperately to get going again. What we haven't yet realized as a country is that this simple investment in social inclusion carries within it an economic force at least as powerful as any other natural or human resource used in the knowledge economy — the intellectual capacity, experience and moral insight of individuals newly connected to the social and economic mainstream.

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[35]David Sherwood, "Certified Literate Community," *literacy.ca* (September 1998), p. 8. (For a copy, see the Movement for Canadian Literacy's website, www.literacy.ca.)